

# Trauma Healing for Refugees: Building Resilience and Restoring Dignity

by Clene Nyiramahoro,<sup>1</sup> © 2022

## What is Trauma?

In the *Healing the Wounds of Trauma: How can the Church help*<sup>2</sup> trauma has been described as a “heart wound” or any “event that causes a person to be overwhelmed with intense fear, helplessness, or horror.” Trauma (a wounded heart) is a life altering emotional and psychological injury caused by a single event or prolonged or repeated events that overwhelm a person’s normal ability to cope. Trauma affects everyone. Each one of us experiences losses and events that cause deep pain. Diane<sup>3</sup> is probably right when she says that “The trauma of this world is one of the primary mission fields of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” This is true of the situation in refugee camps. Trauma is part of the everyday life for refugees, with no room to breathe and recover. The surrounding is a constant reminder of their losses. They are trapped in a cage of despair and darkness. They have lost the sense of wellbeing and start feeling like:

1. The world does not make sense: refugees in the camps can no longer predict what happens to their lives, all the family and social structures have been dismantled. They learn to leave one day at a time hoping that the following day will be better than the previous one. They cannot make their choices and they do not trust those who make decisions for them. The patterns of their lives have been destroyed. They can only see chaos.
2. There is no justice available: there is no sense of what is right or wrong, and their right does not count. Their voice does not count because someone has to speak for them.
3. “*I have no value*” with time refugee start to feel a sense of worthlessness and loss of dignity.

The life in refugee camps is informed by trauma. It is a life of constant stress, constant anxiety and terror. While refugee camps are supposed to be a place of transit to places of long-term settlement, that refugees will call a new “home”, most refugees have been in the refugee camps for decades. There are individuals who have never known any other life apart from the camp. So, the trauma has been passed on from one generation to the other. Refugees lives are characterized by what Diane Langberg calls “generational trauma”<sup>4</sup>. Parents have

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<sup>2</sup> Original authors: Margaret Hill, senior Bible Translation Consultant with SIL International, Richard Bagge, MD and psychiatrist with SIL International, Pat Miersma, Nursing in mental health with SIL International, Harriet Hill worked with SIL International and Trauma Healing Institute at ABS

<sup>3</sup> Diane Langberg is a Clinical psychologist American Association of Christian Counselors Board Chair Trauma Healing Institute Advisory Council Co-Chair

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9N49JvP\\_Fw&t=34s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9N49JvP_Fw&t=34s)

passed on their trauma to their children and their children's children. Generational trauma can also be what Diane calls "complex trauma" which comes as a result of repetitive and prolonged trauma involving all sorts of abuse, betrayals, violence and extreme poverty. The lament written by one pastor in one of the refugee camps echoes the hearts of many:

O God, my Lord! Why have you taken so long to come to my rescue? Why have you forgotten me all this time? Why have you abandoned me in this camp? How long will I be called a "refugee"? When are you coming? Lord, when are you coming? Why are you not getting closer to me? Why is my heart full of pain? I am grieving all the time. I can't eat. When I go to bed I can't sleep. Look at my life and my struggles. Where is my resting place? Look! It is now 33 years since I left my country. I have lost hope. Oh God. Look at me! Look at my struggles. Come to my help. Take away my pain. I struggle day and night. Forgive me my sins. However, even in my struggles I will still wait for you. I will still trust you because I know you are a God of compassion. And I will praise you forever!

Diane describes generational trauma as a "multifaceted, long enduring life" with long term damage to body, mind and soul.

The danger of generational trauma, is that the younger generational born and raised in the camp have no idea what normal looks like. The only life-model they know is their traumatized mother or father whose lives have been characterized by struggles. It becomes hard to develop virtues needed to live a normal life such as hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care and wisdom. Instead they live lives of mistrust, shame, guilt, low-self-esteem, isolation, stagnation and despair. The children grow up with parents who cannot attach, connect, love, care or develop healthy relationships. They live chaotic lives, that is the only reference the children have. That is the only normal they know and have seen. How then can we break the chains? That is why we need trauma healing.

### **Why Trauma Healing?**

When talking to a friend who has been a refugee for almost 20 years she did not hide her frustration expressed in these words: "*Hopelessness is the worst enemy one can face: it kills than the virus*", "*Some assume that refugees are passive: they think for them, work for them, choose for them. As a result of that some refugees become really passive. They are reduced to beggars.*"

When listening to my friend talk, I felt the pain, despair and hopelessness. Another friend, who is a pastor with a Master in Biblical studies said:

*Those who receive refugees are often moved following a given political position and all the organizations that intervene play in a certain direction. Often, it's on the basis of those convictions that organizations are allowed access to refugees or to resources set apart to help refugees. On another side, those organizations represent their own political convictions and objectives.*

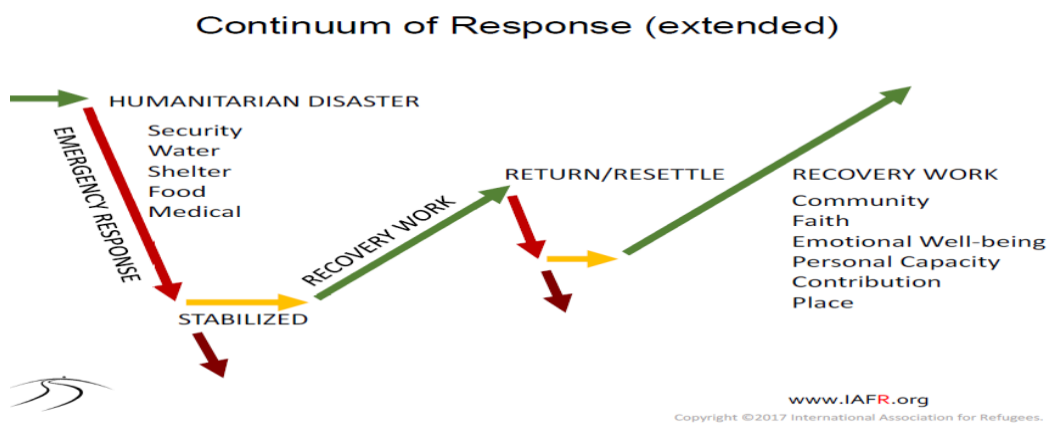
*Aid is then attached to predetermined conditions that represent all those kinds of polity that do not necessarily value the refugee. In several occasions, I felt that the dependence on such organizations is one of the most humiliating experiences in life.*

In the midst of hopelessness, refugees in African countries feel abandoned, their voices not heard, they feel cheated and taken advantage of. They are forced to numb their pain. They struggle with questions like: Where is God? Does he even hear? Is he really just? Even those who have been Christians start to question God deep down in their hearts. As my friend pastor put it:

*“my experience of refugee made me ask several questions about my religious beliefs. Certain questions were almost changing my religious beliefs. I think mostly of the questions about the power of God, His justice and His presence in the world and many other religious matters.”*

This kind of honest response does not easily come unless someone trusts you. Safety and trust are necessary for healing.

Looking at the International continuum response below, it is a fair description of a refugee journey. It helps me understand and interpret what I see when I go to Dzaleka refugee camp which hosts about 50000 people<sup>5</sup>. The camp was established in 1994 and there are people who have been in that camp for more than 20 years.



According to the IAFR description, people in that camp are still in the initial stage of humanitarian intervention. They live at the mercy of humanitarian aid agencies with no rights to find jobs, proper education for their children, no ability to make any long-term plan. The importance of trauma healing is to help people start on their road to recovery. In fact, I prefer using “healing journey” rather than “trauma healing”.

While the dream of every refugee in the camp is to be resettled in the most developed countries<sup>6</sup>, according to UNHCR<sup>7</sup>, only 1% of refugees gets resettled every year and only

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.iafr.org/dzaleka>

<sup>6</sup> The USA (250,800), Germany (102,600), Spain (88,800), France (87,700), Peru (52,600), Mexico (41,200), Greece (37,800), UK (36,000), Turkey (31,300), and Uganda (23,800). <https://www.iafr.org/toolbox#Important-Documents>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/resettlement.html>

001% in 2020, and 86% of the world’s refugees are hosted in developing countries and 27% in the sub-Saharan Africa.

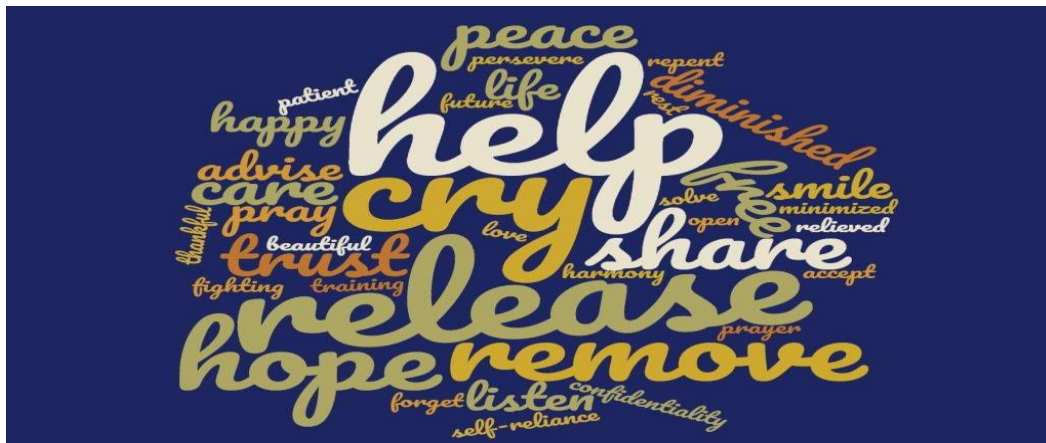
When talking to refugees about things that are source of most trauma, poverty comes on top, plus insecurity, loss of direction, constant humiliation, misunderstanding by the host countries, false accusations, rejection by the church in the host countries. Another refugee I talked to said:

*Mostly, refugees are considered as criminal suspects before they even talk. The fences and barricades established in centres dealing with refugees are often scaring. I am sure that the entire environment that keeps refugees behind barricades affects them psychologically and distresses their behavior. I always have a kind of strangeness when I think of visiting any office of the UNHCR and the circumstance I am likely to face.*

This is not an isolated opinion, it is shared by refugees in refugee camps or in the cities who depend on UNHCR. How can such office provide comfort? Refugee camps are de-humanizing and the question in every one with genuine concern is “For how long?” While the Church can feel powerless, what the Lord is asking us to do little by little, after all healing only happens little by little.

### What does trauma healing entails?

This healing journey begins by helping people start answering some of life important questions: If God loves us, why do we suffer? What can the wounds of my heart be healed? How can I grieve well? When can I take my pain to experience rest (taking the pain to the cross)? How can I forgive others? When leading trauma healing sessions, we give each other permission to openly express our burdens, listen to each other, comforting each other and start building a healing community. Dr. Sunny Hong conducted an interview in Dzaleka in November 2021, she interviewed 35 individuals who have been part of healing groups, asking about the impact of trauma healing in their lives and put most common words in this word cloud.



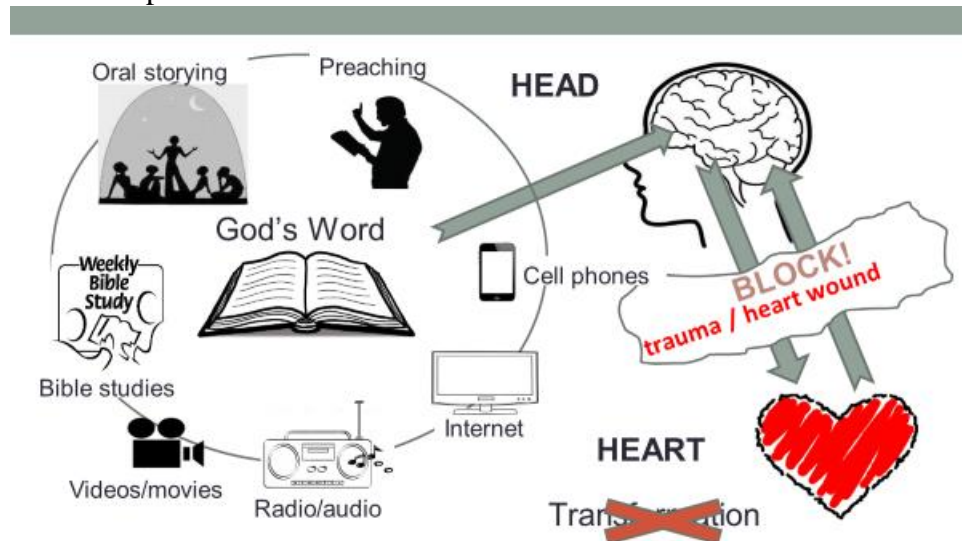
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concept of healing group (6-12 people) is at the center of the healing journey. Diane says that “silence is the preferred response to trauma” and silence leads to loneliness, which, according to psychologists is one of the leading killer of our time. It is in healing group that new bonds

are created and trust is established. People start to feel safe again to share their hearts without fear of being judged. Little by little a community start to form. Trauma healing help people begin to feel well again. Through healing groups, they discover that brokenness is part of life and that that God is aware and is very close to us when we are hurting (Psalm 34:18, Romans 8:19-22). People stop believing the lies that God is far away, not listening, not judging but ready to bind their wounds. They come to the place of feeling loved again and special in the eyes of God (Romans 8:35, 38-39).

### What does trauma do to our brain?

James Covey, a SIL colleague and a professional counselor and psychologist put together a very simple document on how the brain function<sup>8</sup>. Understanding how our brain works helps us see the importance of trauma healing, which is to enable communication between the upstairs of our brain (center of our thinking and decision making) and the downstairs part of our brain (center of our reflexes and instincts including survival). It is the “fight, flight, or freeze” response center. (This is also called our stress response.) The two are connected by the midbrain. The downstairs brain is the most active when we are traumatized, because we always expect danger and are on high alert with no time to listen to upstairs brain. Trauma healing helps to restore the flight between the downstairs and upstairs brain, so that messages are properly processed and right decision is made. The illustration below shows the effect of trauma healing on Scripture engagement. In our churches we read, listen to sermons, participate in Bible studies, watch Christian movies. But if our hearts are wounded the word will never penetrate our hearts and there will be no transformation.



### Impact of trauma healing in Africa

A research has been done to evaluate the impact of trauma healing ministry in Africa<sup>9</sup>. The effects of trauma have significantly reduced in people who have gone through healing groups or have attended other trauma healing sessions.

<sup>8</sup> <https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/my-drive>

<sup>9</sup> <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1IKW21HSaLZ9HBhI2-lpgGtD-Qt104Ndw/edit#slide=id.p3>

There are about 700 churches in Dzaleka refugee camp and more than 60% of refugees belong to a Church. However, when we had sessions for pastors, they themselves discovered that they were dealing with unresolved issues and did not know what to do. They have to live a life of pretense. They prefer hiding their pain, that is the only way they could cope. After attending the trauma healing sessions, they discovered that they needed to be real, and connect with their pain and release it to God. The following are the points taken from Dr Sunny's findings. The participants mentioned that in church they only listen to sermons, which is one-way communication. They do not have Bible and those who do, they don't read them on their own. In the trauma healing sessions, they have an opportunity to read verses and ponder them together. The verses are carefully chosen to help people reflect on their pain. That way, they said, God's word penetrates their hearts. This is what one participants said:

*"Before trauma healing, through reading the Bible, I could get peace. But, after some hours, the terrible memories came back. I was relieved temporarily but the memories came back again. After trauma healing it was not the same, some memories are really gone".*

The participants also liked the "Hands-on-approach learning style." Listening to stories similar to theirs, the opportunity to express their feeling in a safe environment, participating in various activities (skits, lament and other art expressions) helped in the process. Another participant in the interview said:

*"Before attending the TH group, I was like a refrigerator. I kept everything. I learned that I should not keep things in my heart, because it was overcharging. I learned how to cry. Crying made my heart heal. It helped us know how to share our stories, which touch people's hearts. I learned how to pray to God despite our difficulties."*

Healing groups helped in "Building a community of trust" where they can share their stories and know their stories will be treated with care and confidentiality.

*"When I shared my story (before), it added to my wounds. The person I told would go to another person and talk about it. When I heard from the other person about my story, it increased my pain. It rubbed salt into my wounds again. But now I can talk to a trusted person, and it helps me to release my pain"*

Ann Plantinga Kapteyn who is writing her dissertation<sup>10</sup> has this to say

*"I concluded that the OSBTH program was successful in bringing a measure of emotional healing to participants, but beyond that, it engendered a new understanding of God's love and it helped to restore broken relationships within families, church communities, villages, and even to some degree between people groups. The orality aspect of the program allowed*

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<sup>10</sup> *From Horror to Healing: The Impact of the Oral Story-based Trauma Healing Program in Central African Republic* (August 2020)

*the Bible stories, skits, and rituals to become part of the fabric of the communities where the training was held, and the teaching spread far beyond the participants in the program”*

### **Best Model for doing Trauma healing among the refugees (this still developing)**

We approach trauma healing ministry as a healing journey. The main goal is to create a healing community, for healing takes place in a community (which is one of the biggest losses that refugees experiences). A healing community needs to be safe enough for everyone, a place where trust, love and care can be experienced again. When people feel cared for, they also regain a sense of dignity and purpose. A young man who attended one of the trauma healing session as a translator said:

*“I felt God presence in the room and felt I was not supposed to be there because I am not worth to be where God is.”* At the end of the week he came to me with a big smile. When I asked him why he was so happy, he said: *“I am glad I came to attend this event because then I discovered that I am still useful, and my community needs me. I need to go and share what I have learnt with other your people.”*

Indeed, trauma healing aim is not to train trainers but, as Leah, one of the Master facilitator with Pionier Bible Translation in Uganda put it, to foster “PERSONAL HEALING” and “Focus on creating an environment where the Holy Spirit can move, experiencing God in supportive community, recognizing that healing is a process.”

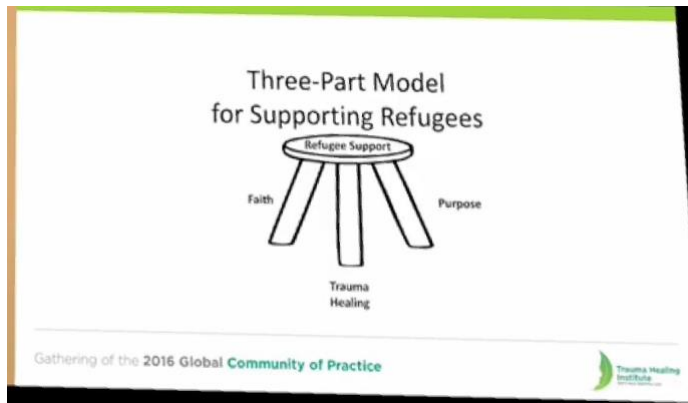
Leah’s focus has been largely on Sudanese refugees in Yida camp, as well as South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. Refugee contexts present unique challenges, but God is doing amazing things. The TH lesson on forgiveness has been especially powerful.

Mentoring and establishing Trauma healing leaders in the community is one of our goals. It goes beyond holding one or two workshops in a given area and leave people figure it out by themselves. Once people are confident, they become a source of comfort and a permanent presence of caregivers that people can run to. Trauma disempower, but healing empowers, community is little by little rebuilt and resilience achieved. That is why we need three pillars as summarized by Dr. Heather Evans after her research conducted in the refugee camps in Rwanda<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Case Studies in Rwanda & Louisville, Kentucky, USA  
Three-Part Model for Supporting Refugees  
Dr. Heather Evans, LCSW  
[www.drheatherevans.com](http://www.drheatherevans.com)  
[heatherevanslcsw@hotmail.com](mailto:heatherevanslcsw@hotmail.com)





Sustainability is the biggest challenge, due to the mindset of the refugee and the way other NGOs operate. The aim is to empower a community by creating space for them to flourish and take charge, and to minimize the effects of trauma. Trauma disempowers.

The pastor friend also made a very interesting observation:

*As just a refugee who is giving a testimony to what I lived, I want to mention one question that has always bothered me. Why those organizations do not fight for the people to resettle among the host communities. Why are refugees not given space to contribute freely in the construction of the countries they join, especially in Africa. That requires a change of status and integration. I see a gap in the way organizations screen refugees and the unwillingness to use them in the building of our world by settling them. They do not purpose to give them a conducive environment to develop as humans and as a socioeconomic resource. I am always amazed when I see how refugees have, against all odds, developed deserts places into living towns and I wonder if they were facilitated instead of being kept on aid dependence.*

### Our lessons learned

- TH is one of the powerful refugee-empowering solutions
- TH must be a way of life--not an event
- HG are key for sustainable healing--Healing happens in a community
- Capacity building-Training, Mentoring (ongoing)
- Advocacy—Making their voices heard
- Resources-Linking with Refugees initiatives with resources and other services providers
- Partnering with other community and Faith- based organizations--No one can do it alone
- Refugees have skills & great capacity to be part of their personal healing & find solutions to meet their own needs when given the opportunity<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> See the example of Innocent here: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/25500/how-covid-19-changed-the-dynamics-for-refugee-organizations>



